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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000710

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR AF/E - RMEYERS AND OES - ESHAW  
FOR AFR/EA/SD - BHIRSCH, TRESCH  
FOR EGAT - ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR  
FOR EGAT/NRM - CJELRON, CGILL, DROBINSON, CKOSNIK  
ADDIS ABABA FOR REO LISA BRODEY  
BEIJING FOR EST OFFICER

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [CH](#) [MA](#)  
SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL TRAFFICKING IN MADAGASCAR

Ref: ANTANANARIVO 687

11. (U) SUMMARY: Recent cases involving tropical hardwood and endangered tortoises highlight the serious problem of environmental smuggling in Madagascar. The island is attractive to smugglers because a broad range of unique species inhabit the island and because law enforcement services tend to lack the resources and the will to prevent their illicit operations. The publicity these cases generated may inspire greater efforts to stop the traffic and greater public awareness of the problem. Nonetheless, it appears certain that successful smuggling is far more common than interdiction. END SUMMARY.

#### Turtles in the Flippers

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12. (U) Most of Madagascar's newspapers July 9 featured prominently the story of a Spanish couple who were arrested at the airport as they attempted to smuggle 48 live baby tortoises out in their luggage. Photographs of the catch showed tortoises stashed everywhere - concealed inside souvenir wooden boxes and bowls and even tucked into the feet of the couple's diving flippers. According to the press, this was the third time in 2007 the airport customs has seized illegal tortoises destined for abroad where they are reported to fetch from 600 to 1,000 Euros each on the international market for exotic pets. The smugglers in this instance seemed to believe they could pay their way through if caught; they were apparently surprised when their wads of proffered cash were not accepted by the customs agent.

#### Rosewood for the Chinese Olympics

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13. (SBU) While tortoise smuggling can be small scale and amateurish, the illegal export of tropical hardwoods requires far greater organization and, almost certainly, complicity from some senior government officials. The most recent cases to gain notoriety involved rosewood (sp. Dalbergia) logs that had been felled illegally and then relabeled as a common, unprotected and far less valuable species as well as logs concealed by being buried in the ground.

14. (SBU) In the first case, the Minister of Environment, Water and Forests Bernard Koto personally signed an authorization for the transportation of 11,850 of these logs, although it is not clear whether he was complicit in the scheme or a dupe of it. These logs, destined for Tamatave, were subsequently transported overland to small ports located between Vohemar and Tamatave in the NW of the country. "Category 3" logs, of inferior species permitted for

export, were inspected and loaded into 12 containers in Vohemar, but then subsequently replaced by the rosewood at smaller ports along the coast. Upon arrival in Tamatave, they were not re-inspected but apparently transshipped through the Comores Islands to China where they are sought specifically for their decorative value in the Chinese Olympic construction boom (Reftel).

15. (SBU) A second case demonstrated, on the other hand, the positive efforts by the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forest to address the serious problem of illegal logging of rosewood in the region of Vohemar and Antalaha. Through the efforts of the Ministry in a "sting operation", a total of 5,135 logs of rosewood were found buried in rice plantations and in the sand; they were seized and have been stored temporarily at the Regional Forestry office. Another nine lots of logs, identified and numbered and ready to be embarked at the port of Vohemar, were also seized. These logs will be transported to Antananarivo via Tamatave where they are to be auctioned. During this operation, the traffickers' network issued threats that forced the regional forestry agent to temporarily leave the region.

#### Steps Taken to Address this Illegal Trafficking

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16. (SBU) In response to the continual illegal trafficking, the Ministry put into place a special task force comprised of representatives from the Presidency, the Ministry, the National Parks Service (ANGAP), the Anti-Corruption Agency (BIANCO), and the Forestry Observatory. This task force is developing measures designed to break up the illegal trafficking mafia in this region. An interministerial decree, signed July 3, has suspended the exportation of all categories of logs from Madagascar.

17. (SBU) Because these logs are slow-growing and harvested from primary forests located in protected areas, the environmental loss

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caused by this trade is irreplaceable within a human lifetime. The smugglers have employed incredibly ingenious and expensive means to conceal the logs in their possession. Such exotic ruses only serve to highlight the profit potential in timber smuggling and justify this firm action by the GOM.

#### New Catches Suggest Many More Misses

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18. (SBU) The Spanish tortoise smugglers are in Malagasy jail and the prosecutor is seeking just over one billion Ariary (USD 550,000) in fines and damages for their crime; their next hearing is set for July 25. While these cases are most often settled by a more modest fine, the notoriety of this trial may lead the courts to make an example of these individuals to include incarceration. In addition - unlike the more large scale hardwood operators - these smugglers appear to lack high level political protection. These catches, and the integrity shown by the airport customs officials, are a source of pride and hope for the Government of Madagascar. However, as in most interdiction operations, it is a safe bet that only a small portion of the outbound illicit goods are recovered and very few smugglers are ever arrested or go to trial.

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